

WAR in the AIR

More About Greatest Air Battle : Coastal Rescue Work

ON Christmas Day every officer and man in the Royal Air Force received a Christmas card from T.M. the King and Queen, with photographs of Their Majesties. The King was shown wearing R.A.F. uniform. A duplicate of the greeting on the card is given on this page.

On Wednesday, December 27, German stations broadcast messages from British airmen who had been taken prisoners of war in the battle over the Heligoland Bight. Among them were F/O. P. A. Wimberley, Sgts. T. J. May and H. Rous, and L.A/C. Jones.

The details of the air battle which took place over Wilhelmshaven on Monday, December 18, are still being sorted out from the mass of information obtained as a result of a study of the reports of individual members of each crew, and it is only now that a clear picture of the action is beginning to take form.

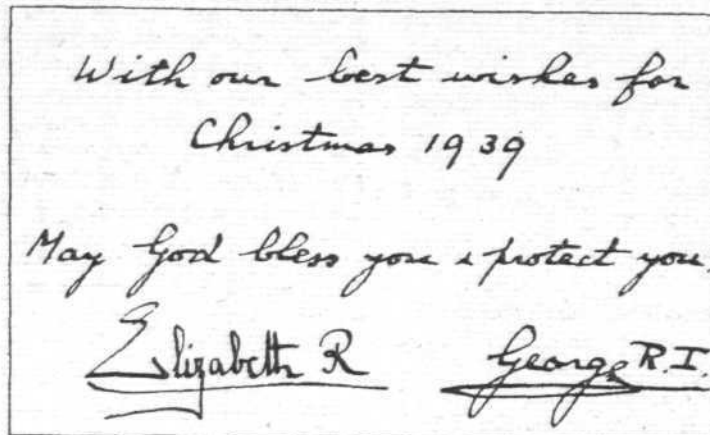
It seems probable that the German Command was very dissatisfied with the result of the operations off Heligoland on December 3, in which a formation of Wellingtons attacked warships and hit two cruisers. On that occasion large numbers of Messerschmitts were despatched to intercept the formations, the approach of which had no doubt been reported by the German air warning organisation at sea. But, though the Messerschmitts succeeded in intercepting our bombers, their attacks were ineffective, and they failed to make any impression on our close and strong formations of Wellington bombers. At least one Messerschmitt was destroyed, and others forced down.

It seems probable that the German Command were thoroughly alarmed at the ease with which this effective attack was carried out without any loss to the bombing formation. Accordingly, in the hope of preventing a repetition of such attacks, they ordered up a number of crack squadrons from elsewhere, probably from the Western Front, to reinforce the defences on their north-west coast. These units have been lately armed with the Messerschmitt 110, a very fast twin-engined fighter.

Opposition at Once

AS our formations entered the Heligoland Bight on December 18 they were almost immediately met by enemy fighters, though not in large numbers. These fighters were easily disposed of, and only one attempted the desperate task of closing with one of the bomber section and was immediately shot down.

But as the group of formations approached its objective at Wilhelmshaven, the skies began quickly to fill with German fighters of various types, mainly the two Messerschmitts, and they soon began to close on our formations and attack them from all directions. The fighting quickly became intense as the crack fighter squadrons strained every nerve to find means to break down our close and tightly packed sections. Then, as the bombers came over Wilhelmshaven, they were exposed to the full blast of the anti-aircraft defences of the naval base. The Germans hoped in this way to force the formations to open out so that their fighters might then be able to deal with them individually, and it was after our bombers had completed their task and turned away from their objective on the return journey that the main attack of the enemy fighters



Their Majesties' greetings to the Royal Air Force.

developed, in a supreme effort to break up the formations which had hitherto held so strongly together.

As this phase of the action developed, casualties on both sides began to mount up. The heavy concentrated fire of the formations had resulted in so many losses to the Messerschmitts that, in a last desperate attempt to break down the ordered array of bomber sections, the Messerschmitts 110 attempted the most spectacular attacks at great speed on the beam of

the formations, trying to sweep the formations with fire from stern to stem. But even this manoeuvre had little success and many of their aircraft were shot down in attempting to get away after a beam attack giving our gunners an excellent shot at close range.

Formation Maintained

THE defeat of this final effort was the last phase of the action and our air gunners, excited and tired, had the satisfaction of seeing the last remaining fighters disappearing towards their own shore. The laurels in the battle undoubtedly go to the Wellington bombers, which resisted the most desperate and, it may be said also, the most courageous and dashing effort of the enemy's crack fighters to break them up and destroy them. Flying wing tip to wing tip, the bombers held together in spite of anti-aircraft fire and of continuous attacks from every direction of the enemy's most modern fighter aircraft. Again and again the enemy fighters, daring to come in too close, were shot down, and the bombers continued on their course uncheckered and unshaken.

Under such a test it is not surprising that one or two of our sections fared less well than others, but where single aircraft were forced by hits to fall away from their section formation they were still by no means an easy proposition for the enemy fighters. Some of these aircraft were lost fighting to the end, with a gallantry to which the Germans themselves bear witness. Others fought their formidable opponents off single-handed, and ultimately succeeded in crossing 300 miles of sea, even though their aircraft were maimed and fighting turrets were out of action.

One of the single aircraft shot down in the course of the action no fewer than five fighters, and although the crew were attacked continuously for a period of nearly 40 minutes, closely followed 60 miles out to sea by a swarm of fighters, they succeeded in driving them off and bringing their aircraft back safely. This exploit testified to the tremendous fighting power of the Wellington and to the dogged determination and courage of its crew. The remarkable success of this single aircraft was no doubt due mainly to the training and efficiency of the gunners, to the skilful flying of the pilot and to the enterprise and resource of the second pilot, who, when two of the gunners were wounded, ran from one gun position to another to meet the attacks from different directions as they occurred.

The crew who drew first blood had a thrilling story to tell. The pilot said: "When we were near Heligoland, and before the main fight had begun, we were attacked by a solitary fighter. He chose my aircraft out of the formation, and in a few seconds my rear gunner had the satisfaction of seeing his enemy crash into the sea. I, too, saw him go straight down. Later, when the battle had developed on a large scale, and when the formation was